

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly

Study Notes



Directed by: Julian Schnabel

Certificate: 12A

Running time: 112 mins

Language: French with English subtitles

Suitable for: GCSE/A Level French, Media/Film Studies, Citizenship, English Literature & Language, Creative Writing, Art & Design, Journalism & Health/Nursing

Synopsis:

Successful magazine editor and writer Jean-Dominique Bouby seems to have it all. He is healthy, wealthy and fast-living. But when he suffers a stroke at the age of 43, he is left with 'Locked In' syndrome – he has lost none of his brain functions or his memory, but he is almost totally paralysed. The only part of his body he can move is his left eyelid. Bouby tries to reconnect with his estranged family, but his condition makes simple everyday tasks and communications impossible. Through his new friend and translator, Bouby decides to dictate his autobiography by blinking to indicate every single letter that will finally make it into his memoir. Throughout this arduous process, Bouby uses the exquisite release of his memory to escape his useless body. Jean-Dominique Bouby died just days after the completion of his book, which this film is based upon.

The Opening Sequence

The opening sequence carefully blends precise dialogue, performances, camerawork and editing to create a scene that is at once striking, informative and crucial to the dilemma of the main character. There isn't a superfluous moment in these opening minutes which visually convey Bouby's mental anguish while simultaneously explaining the complex features of his physical predicament.

1. What filmmaking techniques are used to visualise the sensation of 'locked in' syndrome?
2. At what point in the overall timeline of events does the film's opening sequence occur? What, therefore, is unique about the narrative?
3. What is interesting about the onscreen presence of Bouby during the film's first third? What effect does this directorial decision have on the audience?

Representation

Both men and women are represented in this film in a variety of roles. Women are seen as both subservient and dictatorial; men are insensitive, callow and finally embittered.

4. What do you think the Diving Bell and the Butterfly represent, metaphorically speaking?
5. Do you find Bouby (played by Mathieu Amalric, whom you may recognise as the villain from Quantum of Solace) a sympathetic character? Who do you feel is the most sympathetic character?
6. What positive and negative attitudes does Bouby display in the course of the film, and how do people around him respond?
7. What value seems to be placed on the importance of family? What role do the different family members seem to fulfil?
8. What are your responses to the way women (and girls) are represented in the film? What stereotypical functions do they serve?
9. How are the medical profession and the disabled represented in this film? What are your responses to these representations – would you say they are commonplace?
10. As a practical exercise, film some shots or a short film from the perspective of someone with a disability or visual/auditory impairment. Include POV shots and long tracking shots.

Mise en Scène

This film has been celebrated for its vivid visual style. The present, the past, and idealised memories are all differentiated through film language.

11. Describe how the different time frames are established through the mise en scène. How do we know when it is the past, the present day or one of Bouby's memories?
12. To what extent do you feel the film's visuals reveal Schnabel's other occupation as a painter?

Julian Schnabel – The Director’s Vision

Julian Schnabel is an artist and director whose films so far have shared certain themes, issues and topics. Like Kubrick, Godard and Hitchcock, you could say Schnabel is on his way to becoming an auteur – a director whose personal vision and style is stamped upon each of their films regardless of genre, with the ‘authorial’ presence overseeing the film.

13. Below you will see a list of directors, and a list of film styles and themes. Working in a small group, try to match correctly each of the directors to one of the styles.

Director	Film style and themes
1) M Night Shyamalan	a) morality, sexuality, psychosis, cold/spare style
2) Elia Kazan	b) relationships, existentialism, Jewish identity, NYC
3) Danny Boyle	c) fractured family units, suburbia, absent fathers
4) Steven Spielberg	d) masculinity, honour, faith, slow-motion
5) James Cameron	e) espionage, voyeurism, misogyny, tense sequences
6) Alfred Hitchcock	f) Macho male stereotypes, big action sequences
7) Kathryn Bigelow	g) one-against-many, courage, liberalism, method-acting
8) Stanley Kubrick	h) offbeat stories, contemporary/cultural relevance, trendy soundtracks
9) John Woo	i) crises of faith, bereavement, creatures, twist endings
10) Woody Allen	j) man v technology, nuclear war, military action

14. Would you say any of these directors were ‘auteurs’? Which ones, and why? Remind yourself of their previous films – what extra textual or biographical evidence can you think of that might support or question their status as auteurs?

From simply watching the trailers for Schnabel’s two previous films (Basquiat and Before Night Falls) it is clear that the director is fascinated by the lives of flawed but brilliant protagonists.

15. Look at the trailers and synopses of Basquiat and Before Night Falls. What themes, issues and premises do they share with The Diving Bell and The Butterfly? Consider:

- the characters’ occupations and their predicaments
- origins of each film’s story
- visual style

Director links: 1i; 2g; 3h; 4c; 5j; 6e; 7f; 8a; 9d; 10b

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